



INSTITUTIONAL MECHANISMS FOR WOMEN'S ADVANCEMENT

Kateryna Levchenko: Working Within the System

By Yevhen Hlibovytsky and Oksana Forostyna



An activist from the Ukrainian women's organization FEMEN in Kyiv protests the all-male government formed in 2010. The posters read "Give a portfolio!" © AP Images

Kateryna Levchenko became a feminist early in her career as an academic and has spent her life challenging traditional patriarchal stereotypes of women from within government and through nongovernmental organizations.

Ukrainian human rights advocate Kateryna Levchenko looks much too inspired for a person who just lost a lawsuit. "We're done here. Now it is time to appeal to international community!" Levchenko sued Ukrainian Prime Minister

Mykola Azarov over his March 2010 statement that "conducting reforms is not women's business," which he made when asked why there are no female ministers in his Cabinet. All of the judicial institutions where Kateryna Levchenko filed a case against

him found that Azarov was free to express his views, and did not fault him for the discriminatory nature his words. Levchenko wants to challenge this acceptance of a disparaging patriarchal attitude. It is so common that during the 2009 election campaign

Viktor Yanukovych, soon to be elected president of Ukraine, publicly stated that his rival, Ukrainian Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, would do better in the kitchen. Levchenko does not take such words lightly, and has devoted her career to safeguarding human and women's rights.

Despite ingrained traditional attitudes about women's place, Ukraine does offer women opportunities for achievement. According to the WomanStats Database (<http://www.womanstats.org>), Ukraine is among those countries where the laws are consistent with the recommendations of the U.N. Convention on Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, but enforcement can be inconsistent. The government may or may not support women's advancement, but women can succeed in Ukraine's businesses, government agencies, science and academia. Yet few women participate in power politics. Women make up only seven percent of the Ukrainian Parliament — 34 out of 441 members of parliament as of February 2010 — and none hold significant positions in the current government. Kateryna Levchenko thinks the reason for this is the nature of power in Ukraine, which is rough-and-tumble and requires often ruthless toughness: "That's why there are a lot of women in the middle and junior positions in public administration and so few are on top."

Levchenko had her first real experience of gender discrimination at the age of 26, as a young, successful university lecturer and mother-to-be. She was pregnant for the first time and was obliged to register in a state clinic. After waiting for three hours at the clinic, she tried to change her appointment time to accommodate her teaching schedule, but the doctor yelled at her: "What lectures? No one cares, lady, you're pregnant here, not a professor!" Two decades later she recalls, "Then I understood how discrimination works," adding that a man would not have received such treatment.

Levchenko's path to feminism and human rights is typical for the first generation of Ukrainian feminists, who became public persons in the mid-1990s. She describes her family as "democratic, egalitarian." Her parents were both academics in Kharkiv, which is one of the major scientific and educational centers



Kateryna Levchenko has worked for women's empowerment within government and in nongovernment institutions. *OSCE/Aleksandr Vodyannidov*

of Ukraine and the former Soviet Union. She says she never faced gender problems in her early years in the department of philosophy and scientific communism at the Kharkiv Institute of Railway Engineering. Levchenko recalls: "Those were the times we became familiar with modern Western philosophy [after decades of intellectual isolation], and people were very open-minded." Like many of her peers in the academic community, Levchenko turned to feminism after reading works by Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva and Betty Friedan. Levchenko explains this post-Soviet trend as natural: "Self-identification is a rather complicated process. That's why academic circles were the first to embrace feminist and human rights ideas." She launched the course "Introduction to Gender Theory" in 1996, one of the first academic courses of this sort in Ukraine. Very soon Levchenko would use this successful experience in her work with state institutions and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). She began working for NGOs, first in Kharkiv, then in the Ukrainian capital, Kyiv, coordinating programs for prevention of human trafficking.

In 2004 Levchenko was invited to become adviser on human rights and gender issues to the interior minister of Ukraine. It was a challenging time, both inside

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and outside the ministry. Her new government colleagues hardly understood the concept of gender and were skeptical about human rights, while many activists were surprised at her decision to be a part of law enforcement. In the fall of 2004 an aroused civil society took to the streets to confront the Ukrainian government. The protest lasted two months and became the “Orange Revolution,” so named for the color adopted by the political opposition. Levchenko had to navigate between international organizations and the ministry, which was accused of persecuting political opponents.

Levchenko says the real work began in spring 2005 when Yuriy Lutsenko, who was known for coordinating street protests before the revolution, took the position of interior minister. Levchenko says she held the first meeting with police patrolwomen, top-level ministry investigators and other female ministry staff. “Few knew that we had about 17 percent women in 2005, and 19 percent in 2009. Some of them administrated organized crime divisions and even served in ‘Cobra’ [a special Ukrainian police unit],” Levchenko says.

Human rights activist Taras Hataliak was in prison when Levchenko began her work at the Interior Ministry. Released just few weeks before the Orange Revolution, Hataliak began working with Levchenko. Taras Hataliak was the assistant interior minister in Lviv region (Western Ukraine) where he tracked abuses

of human rights in police departments and prisons. “Levchenko was the policymaker and the messenger of human rights activists inside the ministry. She knew what the grass-roots organizations knew, and made sure that the agenda of civil society soon became part of the minister’s agenda,” he recalls. Hataliak also gives her credit for launching the human rights monitoring system in police departments. Mobile groups for preventing human rights abuses were deployed. Public councils on human rights were established in every region. Legislation to protect human rights was adopted. In 2008 a special department to monitor human rights in law enforcement agencies was created. Levchenko is proud that human rights activists made up 40 percent of the ministry staff. The rest were retired policemen who knew the system and supported human rights reforms.

However, good intentions to reform the police always depend on the political situation in the country. As the governments changed, policies changed. Levchenko served in the Interior Ministry twice: from September 2004 to May 2006, and from January 2008 to April 2010. The department to monitor human rights was dissolved by the Yanukovich government. The former members of the team continue to work on human rights issues through NGOs such as La Strada–Ukraine, which Levchenko heads.

La Strada is a multinational NGO that helps primarily female victims of trafficking and domestic violence

in Central and Eastern Europe. Levchenko says that people from all social groups ask La Strada for help. Calls come mostly from women, but men also request assistance. She expects La Strada’s work to increase as people become better informed about trafficking in persons and as Ukraine’s social services continue to improve.

Kateryna Levchenko’s lawsuit over Ukrainian Prime Minister Mykola Azarov’s disparagement of women was one more strategy in her campaign to bring women into the conversation, equal in status with men. She continues her efforts to reform law enforcement and human rights abuses in whatever way she can, through institutions within and outside of the government

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